

## Film: Art Form or Commodity?

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Please read this article: <http://www.leaderu.com/marshall/mhr04/tark1.html>

- I. Some early developments
  - 1889 William Kennedy Laurie Dickson builds the first motion picture camera
  - 1894 First motion picture studio established
  - 1895 First private screening: Lumière Brothers, France
  - 1905 First movie theatre: Pittsburgh
  - 1911 First feature film
  - 1915 Griffiths: *Birth of a Nation*
  - 1925 Eisenstein: *Battleship Potemkin*; montage principle
  - 1927 First “talkie”: *The Jazz Singer*
  - 1928 First Academy Award
  - 1935 *Gone With the Wind*
  - 1941 *Citizen Kane*
  - 1946 First Cannes Festival, France
  - 1959 French “New Wave”; *Breathless*
  - 1997 *Titanic*
- II. Film as Commodity
  - A. Matrix phenomenon
  - B. Adorno on the “culture industry”
  - C. Matrix box office receipts and rankings
  - D. Matrix advertising
- III. Tarkovsky on film as art
  - A. Techniques: montage and time
  - B. Final scene from *The Sacrifice*
- IV. Adorno on redemption

### Quotations

#### Adorno:

“Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse.” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 25)

“Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products.” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 95)

“The strongest argument in the arsenal of apologists for the cinema is the crudest, its mass-consumption. They declare it, this drastic medium of the culture industry, popular art... The more pretensions a film has to art, the more bogus it becomes.” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 203)

“Through their ubiquitous use under the pressure of the system, advertising techniques have invaded the idiom, the ‘style’ of the culture industry... Every film is a preview of the next, which promises yet again to unite the same heroic couple under the same exotic sun: anyone arriving late cannot tell whether he is watching the trailer or the real thing. The montage character of the culture industry [...] predisposes it to advertising: the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work... Advertising and the culture industry are merging technically no less than economically. In both, the same thing appears in countless places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product is already that of the same propaganda slogan.” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 132-133)

“The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique.” (*Minima Moralia*, p. 247)

### **Tarkovsky:**

“Why does art exist? Who needs it? Indeed does anybody need it? These are questions asked not only by the poet, but also by anyone who appreciates art – or, in that current expression all too symptomatic of the twentieth-century relationship between art and its audience – the ‘consumer’.

Many ask themselves that question, and anyone connected with art gives his own particular answer [...] Every artist is ruled by his own laws but these are by no means compulsory for anyone else.

In any case it is perfectly clear that the goal for all art – unless of course it is aimed at the ‘consumer’, like a saleable commodity – is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question.” (*Sculpting in Time*, p. 36)

“Each of the arts has its own poetic meaning, and cinema is no exception. It has a particular role, its own destiny – it came into being in order to express a specific area of life, the meaning of which up till then had not found expression in any existing art form...

Cinema was the first art form to come into being as a result of a technological invention, in answer to a vital need. It was the instrument which humanity had to have in order to increase its mastery over the real world...

As he buys his ticket, it's as if the cinema-goer were seeking to make up for the gaps in his own experience, throwing himself into a search for 'lost time'. (*Sculpting in Time*, p. 82)

“One of the greatest tragedies of the modern world is the fact that moral problems and ethical interrelationships are not in fashion; they have receded into the background and command little attention. A great many producers eschew *auteur* films because they see cinema not as art but as a means of making money; the celluloid strip becomes a commodity.

In that sense *The Sacrifice* is, among other things, a repudiation of commercial cinema. My film is not intended to support or refute particular ideas or to make a case for this or that way of life. What I wanted was to pose questions and demonstrate problems that go to the very heart of our lives and thus to bring the audience back to the dormant, parched sources of our existence. Pictures, visual images, are far better able to achieve that end than any words, particularly now, when the word has lost all mystery and magic and speech has become mere chatter – empty of meaning, as Alexander observes. We are being stifled by a surfeit of information, yet at the same time our feelings remain untouched by the supremely important messages that could change our lives.” (*Sculpting in Time*, p. 228)

### **Further Reading**

Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989.